

LA 'This I Believe' Essay: Final Piece

When I was younger, seven or eight, I used to think that all beautiful people were kind and all the rest—were just evil. I used to think that one's intellect ruled his character. I used to think that you needed success in every aspect to be happy but now I know, that happiness comes from loving yourself for the way you are.

Was it the fairytales I was fed with when I was younger? Maybe it was—all princesses depicted had kindness in their every move, while the witch had venom in her every sneer. Even before I knew it, I was judging people based on their physical appearances.

In Primary Five, a girl named Yvonne (this is not her real name) joined our class. She was from another lower-end class and the teachers transferred her over; she was ridiculed and jostled around in her previous class.

Before I could stop myself, I was cataloguing her worth—breaking down her every aspect: her apprehensive eyes, her rosy cheeks, her neck with bulging veins, her protruding belly accentuated by the Physical Education shirt which clung to her. She looked like a misfit in the sea of underweight 'beauties'. As I look back now, she was not overweight, just going through puberty earlier than everyone else. At that time, it seemed that everyone drew the same conclusion—she was fat, clumsy and mindless.

In the next few weeks, she was shoved around and ostracized. Teased for entertainment; ignored during group discussions. We all thought she deserved it. Maybe we were just young then, and we made mistakes. On the third Monday afternoon however, there was an unexpected response from her.

It was a dirty affair; the boys were sweaty and the girls with their faces marred in a sneer. Yvonne was cornered, yet again, but this time, her eyes flashed with resolve. Defeat had disappeared.

"I love myself for who I am and nothing you ever say or do will change that." It was the first time she did not waver.

It was then I felt that, to perceive good as surface beauty and evil as surface ugly was the most foolishly delusional concept I had presented myself with. I felt the determination to stop this—it was there for a moment, then it disappeared. I did not have the courage. I stayed away from the monstrosities that were committed but that did not make me any better a human being because the fact was that: I lost the battle for moral courage to peer pressure. She transferred out of school that week. People saw that as an act of a coward, but I saw that it was exasperation.

Till today I feel apologetic for not stopping any of it. Now, with maturity that comes with age, I realize that one very human tendency—constant comparisons to others that end with self-deprecating thoughts—is our greatest weakness. With this, it is also clear that one's character cannot be weighed by physical appearance or mental ability. To constantly seek perfection, much time and effort is put into conforming ourselves to society's definition of 'beauty' or being critical of others based on the very same criteria. I believe in the unique beauty of every human born; that cannot be replaced or destroyed.

Does this mean I have embraced all my flaws?

Sometimes, I do feel self-conscious—whether it is my intellectual ability or body image in question. But self-reassurance always makes me feel better. Like everyone else, I am slowly working towards accepting myself for who I am. I will always remind myself that: The greatest gift to yourself is to love yourself for who you are.

This, I believe.